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Extension Resource Use Among Washington State Wine Makers and Wine Grape Growers: A Case for Focusing on Relevance

Abstract

Interview and surveys were used to understand Extension relevance in the context of overall information resource use among Washington State wine makers and wine grape growers. Relevance, rather than adoption, is suggested as a frame for assessing Extension communication with these practitioners. Results suggest that Extension resources are used and valued, but not always perceived as relevant. Moreover, practitioners' resource use preferences were diverse but tended to fall into three categories: science driven, value driven, and utility driven. Appreciating differences in how these groups perceive Extension resources as relevant may be useful in framing more efficient and effective communication with them.

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Relevance, as a user-centered way of listening to an audience, is an under-used assessment opportunity for Extension. Audience response to a message is often assessed in terms of outcomes adoption: Did the target population change their behaviors or attitudes? Such assessment questions make sense when a message focuses on a specific behavior but are less useful for assessing how well communications serve a community's information needs more generally. Particularly for professional communities, whose members may use information resources in diverse or even unpredictable ways, relevance offers a better model for understanding how Extension communications are being received. This sort of user-centric assessment asks not whether the audience has adopted a desired practice but whether the audience members have, in light of their own professional expertise, found Extension resources useful (Archer et al., 2007).

Relevance, as it is being discussed here, is a fluid construct, accounting for not just topicality but also environment, information-seeking preferences, and other user-centric criteria (Froehlich, 1994). It differs in this sense from the more generic use of the term to indicate topicality alone (Nadeau, Heidorn, Broady, & Whittle, 2010; Smith, 1991). Relevance has been described as a function of information validity and the work required to access a resource, not only in physical

terms but also in the sense of "cognitive effort" to understand and place new information in the context of what is already known (Huang & Soergel, 2013; Kritz, Gschwandtner, Stefanov, Hanbury, & Samwald, 2013; Ramos 1998). A refocus on relevance is a move away from the much-maligned deficit model, which assumes that nonscientists' failure to take up scientifically supported information is the product of ignorance (Sturgis & Allum, 2004; Weigold, 2001). Assuming that practitioners who do not employ research-supported practices are not listening and need persuading may well provoke resentment in addition to impede effective communication (Knott & Wildavsky, 1980). Instead, a more theoretically supportable, and likely more effective, approach is practitioner-focused, centered on how practitioners view information resources in a practical context.

To determine how relevant Washington State wine makers and wine grape growers found Extension resources within the context of information resources in general, I interviewed wine practitioners in two key wine-producing regions and conducted a statewide survey of wine practitioners. As no patterns of difference in the responses of wine makers and wine grape growers emerged, I will subsequently refer to them together as "practitioners." Results suggest, first, that Extension resources are used and that practitioners trust and value them but that they do not consistently find them relevant. Second, practitioners' resource use preferences fell into distinctly different patterns related to diverse attitudes about what it means to be a good practitioner. Understanding such differences may help Extension communicators frame information in ways that improve relevance for various groups of practitioners.

Methods

Washington is second only to California in U.S. wine production, with approximately 800 wineries, 350 wine grape growers, and 12.5 million cases produced annually (Washington Wine Commission, 2014). Most wineries are small, with production generally below, often far below, 20,000 cases per year and a largely regional (northwestern United States) consumer base. The wine community is served by a research and Extension program at Washington State University (WSU), with Extension faculty and staff concentrated at the Tri-Cities campus, which is located near key wine producing regions.

Interviews were solicited via personal emails to all practitioners identifiable by web presence located in Walla Walla or the general Prosser/Yakima/Zillah area. Interviews were scheduled with 18 practitioners willing and able to be interviewed when the research was taking place. All interviews occurred in tasting rooms or adjoining offices in private or semi-private settings. Although interviewees were chosen by convenience sampling, their heterogeneity mimicked that of the industry. They ranged in age from early 30s to over 60 and in years of industry experience from less than 5 to well over 20. Their degree qualifications ranged from associate's to professional doctorate level. Case production was less than 1,000 cases per year at the smallest of their wineries and approximately 22,000 at the largest.

I conducted, recorded, and manually transcribed semi-structured interviews lasting from 40 min to over 2 hr. I then coded data via the iterative or "constant comparative" (Evans, 2013) approach characteristic of grounded theory. Codes around information resources, wine maker education, science and technology, and the nature of wine making were then developed into themes and tested

against both the transcriptions and the survey data.

An online survey followed the interviews and was informed by interview responses. The survey (hosted at FluidSurveys™) was distributed to practitioners via multiple channels: a link in the Washington State Wine Commission's weekly email news, an email distributed via the WSU viticulture and enology Extension email list, and personalized emails to all wineries with available email addresses (approximately 500 total). Eighty-four responses (approximately 17%) were received.

Because approximately half of survey respondents followed a link distributed via an Extension email list, subscribers to WSU Extension publications are likely overrepresented. Practitioners who rarely or never employ email or the Internet are likely unrepresented. Unfortunately, because no comprehensive demographic data are available for the survey population, judging the representativeness of the survey is impossible. The survey was designed to indicate the presence, not the prevalence, of practitioner characteristics (Horst, 2013).

Results

Because my aim was to understand what practitioners find useful and relevant rather than to determine the impact of specific communications, both the interviews and the surveys included questions about information resources broadly rather than Extension resources alone. The in-depth interviews provided core data for understanding practitioners' attitudes, with supporting survey data providing evidence from a larger, statewide population.

Practitioners overwhelmingly expressed appreciation for research in general and for local WSU-driven research in particular. Nevertheless, they said that most new information they encounter is not "relevant" or "applicable" to them, either because it is not what they "want to do" or because implementing it is not practical in their setting. Rather than articulating this disconnection as a frustration per se, most respondents viewed it as a consequence of the highly contextual nature of wine making and grape growing. Some, however, reported thinking that too much research involves expensive equipment that they do not need or cannot afford or that is otherwise impractical. Those who expressed such complaints were in the minority as compared with those who were pleased that researchers are investigating their problems "in their own backyard."

Resource Preferences

Selected responses to the survey question "How often do you use the following types of resources to learn about new winegrowing/making information?" are summarized in Table 1. Responses to both the interviews and the surveys indicated that practitioners' preferred and most often-used resources are trade publications and peers. Most respondents (approximately 80%) access trade publications as print copies. In interviews, some practitioners suggested thinking that trade magazines are useful but lack sufficient detail to enable their coming to any usable conclusions from reading them. Additional popular resources included seminars and workshops (hosted by Extension and numerous other agencies), Extension publications, textbooks, and vendor representatives, the last of which are consulted at least occasionally by 55% of respondents.

Table 1.

Selected Survey Responses to the Question "How Often Do You Use the Following Types of Resources to Learn About New Winegrowing/Making Information?"

Resource	Often/most often	Never
Trade magazines	71%	2%
Peers	56%	1.5%
Face-to-face seminars and workshops	37%	5%
Extension newsletters/other publications	37%	20%
Textbooks	26%	11%
Extension faculty/staff	21%	19%
Vendor representatives	15%	12%
Facebook	8%	64%
Twitter	0%	88%

Beyond time and the logistical ease of attending, previous interest in a topic was the most important factor influencing seminar attendance. Excepting occasional skepticism about vendor events, practitioners discussed seminars presented by Extension, community colleges, vendors, the Washington Wine Technical Group, and university guest speakers without drawing clear distinctions among these sponsors' events. Extension is, in other words, one of many information resource providers with which these practitioners regularly interact.

Notably, social media, including Facebook and Twitter, were *not* widely used as information resources. Facebook was never a professional information resource for 64% of survey respondents, and 88% reported never using Twitter for this purpose. Social networking platforms were never mentioned in interviews. When interviewees mentioned consulting with peers, Extension faculty, or vendor representatives, they discussed making phone calls or, less often, sending emails. When asked how they prefer to access information resources, survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they prefer face-to-face and text resources, either web-based or hard copy, but not social media. Respondents also reported little use of or interest in videos or webinars in this context.

Extension Resource Use

Extension faculty/staff were a frequently used resource for 21% of survey respondents. Interviews made clear that respondents who contacted Extension faculty/staff perceived them to be helpful, friendly, available, and valuable. Practitioners frequently cited as valuable their personal relationships with Extension staff and the willingness of Extension staff to be called for help with a specific problem. However, the most vitally helpful characteristic highlighted over and over in

interviews and surveys was Extension faculty/staff's ability to understand the practical needs of people working in the industry and to make their research "relevant" and understandable. It is not surprising that practitioners related this ability to the fact that specific Extension staff have spent time working in the practical side of the industry in nonacademic roles.

Extension newsletters and other publications, such as email "news blasts" and harvest updates, are read often or as a main source by 37% of survey respondents but are never read by 20% of survey respondents. Interview data corroborated this split, with some interviewees describing frequent use of these resources and others not mentioning them at all. The division was unrelated to job description (wine makers and wine grape growers fell into both groups), education, age, or size of winery with which the practitioner is involved. Without exception, when practitioners were asked about Extension in interviews, they mentioned seminars and direct contact with staff before Extension publications. Survey respondents who indicated that they rarely or never consulted with Extension staff also were likely to indicate that they rarely or never read Extension publications or used university websites; likewise, those who consulted with Extension staff often were more likely to read Extension publications and visit university websites often. Interestingly, the level of trust practitioners accorded to information from Extension was unrelated to the likelihood of their using Extension resources. Extension resources and academic journals were, in fact, the only resources that more than 90% of survey respondents believed to be trustworthy or very trustworthy, with only 74% of respondents according the same level of trustworthiness to trade publications and 35% to private company websites.

Diversity and Attitudes

The diversity in practitioners' resource use patterns and preferences, as indicated across the interviews and the surveys, was striking. Perhaps surprisingly, the best predictor of which resources practitioners found relevant was not education, experience, age, type of employment, or any similar demographic but was, instead, attitude toward what constitutes "good wine making." Interview results suggest that practitioners' varied resource use patterns and preferences can be categorized into three types: science driven, vision driven, and utility driven.

A minority (about one-sixth) of interviewees and survey respondents aligned with a "science-driven" profile, expressing that clear right and wrong ways of making wine exist, that the right way is always the most scientifically supported way, and that good wine makers follow research-based best practices to the best of their abilities. Peer-reviewed scientific literature and Extension, therefore, were relevant to members of this group, whereas peers and vendor resources were not. Practitioners in this group were strongly supportive of Extension and saw Extension faculty/staff as one of their main information sources, although they implied that Extension publications and events were generally intended for less knowledgeable practitioners and that most were too basic for them.

In contrast, most practitioners aligned with either a "vision-driven" profile or a "utility-driven" profile, with scientific resources serving not as instructions or best practices but as suggestions or tools. Vision-driven practitioners were adamant that right and wrong do not exist in wine making; that good wine making is about staying true to a personal vision; and that following recommendations too proscriptively may, therefore, harm wine quality. They made use of many

different information resources to learn about new techniques that they might try piecemeal to achieve small quality improvements. For them, Extension resources were relevant as one of many reservoirs of new ideas.

Utility-driven practitioners also were information omnivores. They were willing to learn from many sources, but they prioritized the practical value of information, tending to first ask, "Do I have the material resources to try this?" and "Will the benefits of this strategy be worth the costs?" rather than "Does this serve my personal vision?" Right and wrong, for them, was about what works for their goals in a particular context. Although they valued research in the abstract, they cared more about whether something works than whether it is scientifically supported. Observing that scientists and practitioners often have different goals, that cutting edge research is often not yet practical, and that scientific recommendations sometimes change over time, they tended to place less emphasis on continuing education or keeping up with new research and instead sought out information resources more specifically when they had a problem to solve. They were most likely to question the trustworthiness of Extension (though that was a minority attitude), to be frustrated by conflicting information resources, and to place their highest trust in information from their peers. For them, Extension resources were relevant as an occasional source of practical solutions.

Discussion

An obvious point, but one disguised by adoption-focused assessments, is that wine makers and wine grape growers are experienced professionals who often resent being told (or perceiving that they are being told) what is "best." All practitioners cannot and should not be expected to be science driven. Indeed, an industry whose health depends on variety and individual passion might suffer if its practitioners *were* all science driven. Those engaging in efforts to assess Extension communications should consider the idea that evaluating success under the assumption that practitioners should be more scientific may be counterproductive.

The typology outlined here may be most useful as a heuristic for considering professional practitioner attitudes in light of framing effective communication tools (Horst, 2013). Envisioning a practitioner community as comprised of multiple subcommunities with different attitudes toward their craft suggests ways of framing information with practitioners' various needs and receptivities in mind. Science-driven practitioners are likely to ascribe greatest relevance to resources that present scientifically supported best practices. Vision-driven practitioners, in contrast, may reject the idea of best practice and find the same information more relevant when presented as suggested techniques for achieving particular goals. Utility-driven practitioners likely would respond best to resources that emphasize the conditions under which information is practical.

In the study reported here, broad surveys were useful for understanding how Extension is valued in the context of information resource use in general, but the surveys were not adequate in fully identifying resource use and preference patterns. Interviews were needed to characterize these patterns. Going out to speak with practitioners with an open set of questions about whether and how Extension resources are relevant affords opportunities to listen and to discover what someone constructing a survey might not know in advance to ask. This action also gives practitioners an opportunity to discuss how information resources fit into their daily lives. As Extension itself

continues to work to be relevant in the second century of its existence, responsiveness and respect continue to form part of the core characteristics of "engaged institutions" (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004). The act of listening to understand practitioner perspectives and the implementation of user-centric assessments serve these goals.

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